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ABSTRACT

Reproductions of 19 photographs that document some of the families and history of the African-American community in Bloomington, Indiana, from about 1870 to 1920, are contained in this paper. The paper discusses the use of photographs in historical inquiry, and posits that the photographic image carries the power of witness to past peoples and events. Although these photographs are specific to a particular community and historical period, the manner in which they are presented here could serve as a useful model for the documentation of the history of other communities. A list of 12 references is included. (DB)

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PHOTOGRAPHS.

PRESENTATION TO THE INDIANA ASSOCIATION OF HISTORIANS, ANNUAL
MEETING, MARCH, 1990

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AN ANALYSIS OF BLOOMINGTON'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY THROUGH
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First, I want to apologize for what may be a misleading title - rather than an "analysis" of Bloomington's African-American community based on a photographic record, my purpose here is to highlight an important visual resource in the state of Indiana, and suggest some of the ways photographs can be useful in historical research.

In 1988, Elizabeth Bridgwaters - one of Bloomington's leading citizens, and often referred to as "the matriarch of the black community" - donated to the Mathers Museum at Indiana University her personal collection of over 600 photographs documenting the families and history of Bloomington's African-American community over a span of some 115 years. Mrs. Bridgwaters had amassed the collection - beginning with her own family's photographs, and going on to borrow, beg, and even rummage abandoned structures for photographs from other families - because she had intended to write a history of the African-Americans in Monroe County. But at 78 years old, she began studying for the ministry, and realized she no longer had the time to write a history, and generously donated the images and the information she had on each one to the University, for the use of researchers in the state, and beyond, in an effort to "shed some light on the activities of Black people over the years, because what should have been in the history books is not there."

The collection is now processed and catalogued, and as a whole forms an impressive visual documentation of a vital and long-lived community, as well as being one of the largest such collections in the country.

In thinking about suggesting uses, then, for photographs in historical

inquiry, this is the simplest and most basic level at which they function: first and foremost, they are - like diaries, journals, and letters - simple evidence, bearing witness to past peoples and events. As photographic historian, Alan Thomas, puts it, the photographic image entails "...the power of witness." I once asked the young woman who photographically processed the entire collection what she had found most memorable in it, and her response was "That it's there. I'm a senior photography major and never once did I have to consider black skin tones, and suddenly I'm dealing with a whole world populated only by blacks. It must rather be like being Jewish and going to Israel."

And yet, like diaries and letters, family photographs cannot tell the whole story: not all survive, and too often the survival is random, not based on merit or importance. Houses burn, later generations are indifferent. Mrs. Bridgwaters still bemoans some of the families and houses she didn't get to in time.

Further, like diaries and journals, photographs are subjective - they are one person's selection out of a near-infinity of possibilities, of what is worth photographing, what is worth preserving of the moment, and how best to present it. And one person's collection extends that subjectivity, shaping the collection by selecting out and preserving images that conform to the intent of the collector. Photographs also assume a certain disposable income - either in sitting for a formal studio portrait, or in the money required to buy a camera, the film, and the processing. The Bridgwaters collection reflects these biases. As the descendant of one of Bloomington's earliest and most influential African-American families, Mrs. Bridgwaters' collecting emphasizes the solid and the industrious citizens: the formal portraits show people well-versed in

the attainments and accoutrements of middle-class life and aspirations; the snapshots are by and large appealing; and ruffians, criminals, and grinding poverty are rather strikingly absent.

However, unlike diaries and letters, photographs are subjective in a more complex way - they assume an audience, a viewer, as well as a subject and a photographer/selector. They are a complicated three-way communication system, and as such they function on a symbolic level - what is depicted, and how, and why - conforms to social constructs and is embedded in cultural expectations. One researcher, Graham King, has identified three basic categories that recur in family photographs throughout Westernized society: one is portraiture, either an individual or a group, usually with signals that denote the material assets of a family especially houses (often shorthandedly signalled by doorways or porches), cars, and best clothes; or the achievements of a family such as graduation or awards, sports and hunting shots, and vacation photos. A second category is celebration images - records of anniversaries, weddings, and holidays. The third category is baby pictures - babies in every variety of familial configuration.

Whether these categories derive from cultural conventions, as King believes, or from conventions in Western art as others have suggested, or even are human archetypes, as Michael Lesy, a provocative writer in the area of photographs as social documents, posits, these categories are indeed present, and in abundance, in the Bridgwaters collection. Elegant formal portraits commemorate an age or an event; snapshots show children or families or friends in front of houses and on porches; there are sporting events; and there are several cars over several decades depicted.

In addition, as an exhibit in 1986 on "Blacks in America" at the Eastman House in Rochester, NY, noted "The photographic record...traces several recurring themes from the black experience. One of these is the importance of religion...Another is the emphasis on education." I would add another, as well, that of workplace photographs, probably as a subcategory of achievement photos. These emphases do appear in the Bridgwaters collection, over the span of years, with some decades showing a larger representation than others.

But given these caveats and considerations concerning the use of photographs - their random survivability, their subjective nature on many levels, their symbolic content and their categorical and iconic nature - one further observation must be made, and it is one that underlies all the foregoing: photographs require context. A photograph with no name, date, or place associated with it gives only the most limited of historical evidence.

As Michael Lesy phrases it in Time-Frames, "If a snapshot is broken from its context of life and love, and, like some anonymous curiosity, is stuck to the wall of a studio or pinned to the bulletin board of a study, it may appear to strangers to be as enigmatic as a piece of quarried stone in the middle of the desert. However, once it has been restored to its narrative and iconographic context, the ordinary snapshot becomes the capstone of a pyramid whose base rises from the human heart."

He goes on to say about photographs in context that "...they inevitably fall into the hands of children, whose pasts are made accessible to them by images which provoke questions never before asked or never before answered."

With context, with narrative, photographs become a powerful bridge to

the past. With an immediacy beyond other historical documents, the photographic image in context restores a narrative sense to history and historic events, giving faces, names, dates, and stories to broad movements in history.

Elizabeth Bridgwaters sense of history is essentially narrative; all the photographs came with documentation. As Elizabeth said, "I find that every Black family has an interesting and challenging history behind it....I think it's the obligation of those that...have discovered that to tell the story."

With this in mind, I'd simply like to show you some photographs from the collection, roughly in chronological order, from the first fifty years of a vital community within a community - around 1870 through 1920 - and tell you some of the stories.

Fig. 1. This is Andrew Henson, in an albumen print dated around 1875. While a few black families had settled in Bloomington before the Civil War, the years after it saw an influx of African-Americans, predominantly from Kentucky and other states of the upper South, leaving memories of slavery and seeking opportunity in the North. Andrew Henson came to Monroe County from Kentucky in the late 1860's, and bought a section of land 3 miles northwest of Bloomington, which he farmed and which attracted other settlers. Up until this century the area was known as Hensonburg, and had its own school for grades one through eight.

Fig. 2. Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Henson, in a studio portrait from Terre Haute, Indiana, mid-1880's. Henson descendants remain among prominent African-American families in Bloomington, and are related to Matthew Henson,

a Black who accompanied Admiral Peary to the Pole. In fact, oral history in the African-American community has it that it was Henson, not Peary, who located the Pole and placed the American flag.

Fig. 3. Amanda Henson Ghan, in an unidentified studio portrait. A daughter of Andrew Henson, she became a charter member and the first to be baptized in Bethel A.M.E. church when it was organized in 1870.

Fig. 4. Preston Emanuel Eagleson, from an unidentified studio print of the early 1880's. This is the donor's father, and the back is captioned "wearing a tailor-made suit for Tom Thumb wedding, Bethel A. M. E."

By the 1880's, America was undergoing massive urbanization, and in addition to the stream of immigrants from the South, Bloomington was increasing in size through immigration from the smaller surrounding towns. H. V. Eagleson, Preston's father - and Elizabeth's grandfather - came from Mitchell, Indiana, around 1880, determined that each of his six children would have a university education.

Fig. 5. Preston Emanuel Eagleson, studio portrait, 1894 or 1895. Not only did he attend Indiana University, graduating with a B. A. in 1896, and becoming the first black to receive a Master's Degree from IU in 1906, he was the first African-American to play on IU's football team.

It's important to note that Indiana University was a strong factor in many African-American family's decision to move to Bloomington, and many black families were well-educated, and especially so by nineteenth-century standards. (All of the Eagleson children attended IU, by the way, and five graduated.)

Fig. 6. The IU football team portrait of 1894-1895, with Preston Eagleson in the lower left. He played half-back for two seasons, and there were several ugly incidents with racial overtones during his career, both on the field and off. When he was refused accommodation in a hotel on a team trip, he sued for and collected damages, setting a court precedent in Indiana.

Fig. 7. Moving into the twentieth century, this is the eighth grade graduating class from "the colored school", in 1908. Around this time, the African-American community was centered on the east side of town, between the University and the downtown square, in an area called "Bucktown."

It wasn't until 1916 that a new segregated elementary school, named "Banneker School" was built on the west side for black students, and a Carnegie Library was built on the old "colored school" site. One rationale for the move was that black and white students were fighting as they passed each other on their way to their respective schools, so the African Americans were routed to the west side. The truth is simply that the east side properties were becoming desirable real estate, and the African-American community was being forced out.

Fig. 8. This is the 1909 Bloomington High School varsity baseball team, with Glodie Ghan - one of Amanda Henson's sons - at the back. The high school was integrated, there being too few blacks to justify the town going to the expense of building a separate high school as well as elementary schools.

Fig. 9. Here is the Cherry Hill baseball team, an informal sports

team. In addition, the pre-World War I African-American community supported a semi-pro baseball team called "the Black Diamonds" which travelled, as well as played locally and in exhibition games.

Fig. 10. Economically, the Showers Brothers Furniture factory was one of the largest employers of African-Americans, and had been since its founding in the 1860's. Its location until 1884 on Bloomington's east side was a major reason for the African-American community developing there.

This is a snapshot of Lewis Chandler, Lester Burnett, and James Buka in front of one of the Showers buildings between Rogers and Morton on the west side. Although a consistent employer, blacks primarily remained unskilled workers at the factory, with only three becoming foremen, one becoming an inspector, and one a pattern-maker.

Fig. 11. African-Americans also had their own businesses. In addition to ministers like Preston Eagleson, and teachers in the "colored school", entrepreneurs found niches in Bloomington's or the black community's economy, running boarding houses, as caterers and restaurant-owners, as teamsters, and especially as barbers and beauticians. This snapshot from around 1910 shows George Campbell, a barber, and his wife on the left. The young woman in the left center is Mamie Young, whose beauty shop on east Kirkwood forms the backdrop for this photo.

Fig. 12. Drayage was another important economic niche, as shown here by Fred Hill, who was born in Kentucky and brought to Bloomington by his parents in about 1880. At the Martin Creamery, in 1910, he was a delivery driver for several years until he bought his own taxi and horse.

Fig. 13. Kappa Alpha Psi, Alpha Chapter. Formal portrait, 1915. Kappa

Alpha Psi, a black fraternity was formed on campus in 1911, and bought a house on the near west side. Blacks were not allowed to live in University housing during these decades, until Herman Wells became University president, so boarding houses and the fraternity filled an important function during this period.

By 1914, there were Kappa Alpha Psi chapters in Illinois and Iowa, and it remains the only Greek-letter fraternity founded at Indiana University.

Fig. 14. This is Glodie Ghan, the young man in the high school varsity baseball team picture, grown up. A studio portrait, circa 1917.

Fig. 15. Another studio portrait of two young men from Bloomington, Ira and Charles Chavers. This one was taken in Chicago.

Fig. 16. Five of Bloomington's African-American veterans of World War I, in a snapshot, including the donor's brother, Wilson Vashon Eagleson.

World War I, in a very real way, marks an end point in the vitality of Bloomington's black community. Having participated fully in middle class aspirations, educational opportunities, and then the war effort, young people found employment opportunities commensurate with their skills and abilities unavailable locally.

In addition, the further urbanization of America and the great Northern migration of blacks accelerated by the war, had bypassed the smaller towns like Bloomington. It was the larger cities, and ones farther north that were attracting the young and capable. None of the young men pictured in uniform are buried in Bloomington - all had left, for careers elsewhere.

Fig. 17. Strictly speaking, this photo from around 1922 is beyond the scope of today's presentation. But Mattie Jacobs Fuller was an early resident of Bloomington and became one of its first beauticians. Born of slave parents, she learned how to make skin lotions and creams in Kentucky before migrating north.

She is best remembered in Bloomington however as she is here, playing her small portable organ on the town square to help pay off the mortgage for Bethel A. M. E.'s new building. Between 1922 and 1929, she raised \$13,000 for the church.

This photo is appropriate too, in its imagery, for another reason. Beyond the twenties the photographs become increasingly centered on church and church organizations, and more and more populated by the very young and the middle-aged, and the elderly. In the decades that follow, there are more home shots, and more centering on such exclusively African-American organizations as the black only Elks Lodge on West Seventh St., and black sororities and clubs.

Fig. 18. And finally, though not part of the Bridgwaters collection, but certainly part of the story, is this photograph that came to light in the Museum during the Bridgwaters project. The image was on a deteriorating nitrate negative and was nearly lost. It's a November, 1922, Klan rally in downtown Bloomington, a rally which incidentally, was accompanied by an I. U. drum corps.

Racism has always been a strong current in Southern Indiana, as the "colored schools", the relocation of the African-American community within Bloomington to the west side through condemnation of black properties, and limited employment opportunities attest, but its

resurgence in the twenties through the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana had a profound effect on black citizens. The color line, which had always been in place, became more finely drawn and more strictly enforced, leaving both communities in possession of what came to be perceived as separate worlds and separate histories.

Fig. 19. As a last photograph, though, I wanted to show you my favorite one of Elizabeth Bridgwaters. We have more formal portraits of her, and her family, but I like this one best, from around 1960, with her husband Albert in their back yard on West Seventh Street. (I told her once I always think of her with her head erect, and chin up, and it's nice to see her leaning against someone for a change.) She's a remarkable woman.

As a concluding thought, then, I'd like to point out the power of a visual image, properly associated in its context, restored to an ongoing narrative. These photographs, in their entirety, suggest a vital, interdependent, courageous community.

In all honesty, I don't believe an "analysis of a community" can be done, based upon a photographic record. We have seen how the photographic record is necessarily incomplete - either by chance or selection that it is subjective on many levels - and is usually class-biased. It is predictable in its categories, and even when the record evidences the emphasis on religion, education, and the workplace in the African-American experience, we are not surprised for we know these emphases from other sources.

What the family photograph - when restored to its family narrative - can do in historical research goes beyond simple confirmation of participation in the historic moment. The visual image has the immediacy

and the power to do what a good story can do - it elicits another story. And then a cycle of stories. And then the questions that are the stuff of historical inquiry and interpretation begin: How did this happen; Why was it that way; How often; When; and What did people do.

And these questions, which were perhaps "...never before asked or never before answered", are impelled by the immediacy of a face, a pose, a gesture - and a story.



Fig. 1

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Fig. 2

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Fig. 3

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Fig. 4

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Fig. 5

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Fig. 6

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Fig. 7

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Fig. 8



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Fig. 9



Fig. 10

Fig. 11





Fig. 12

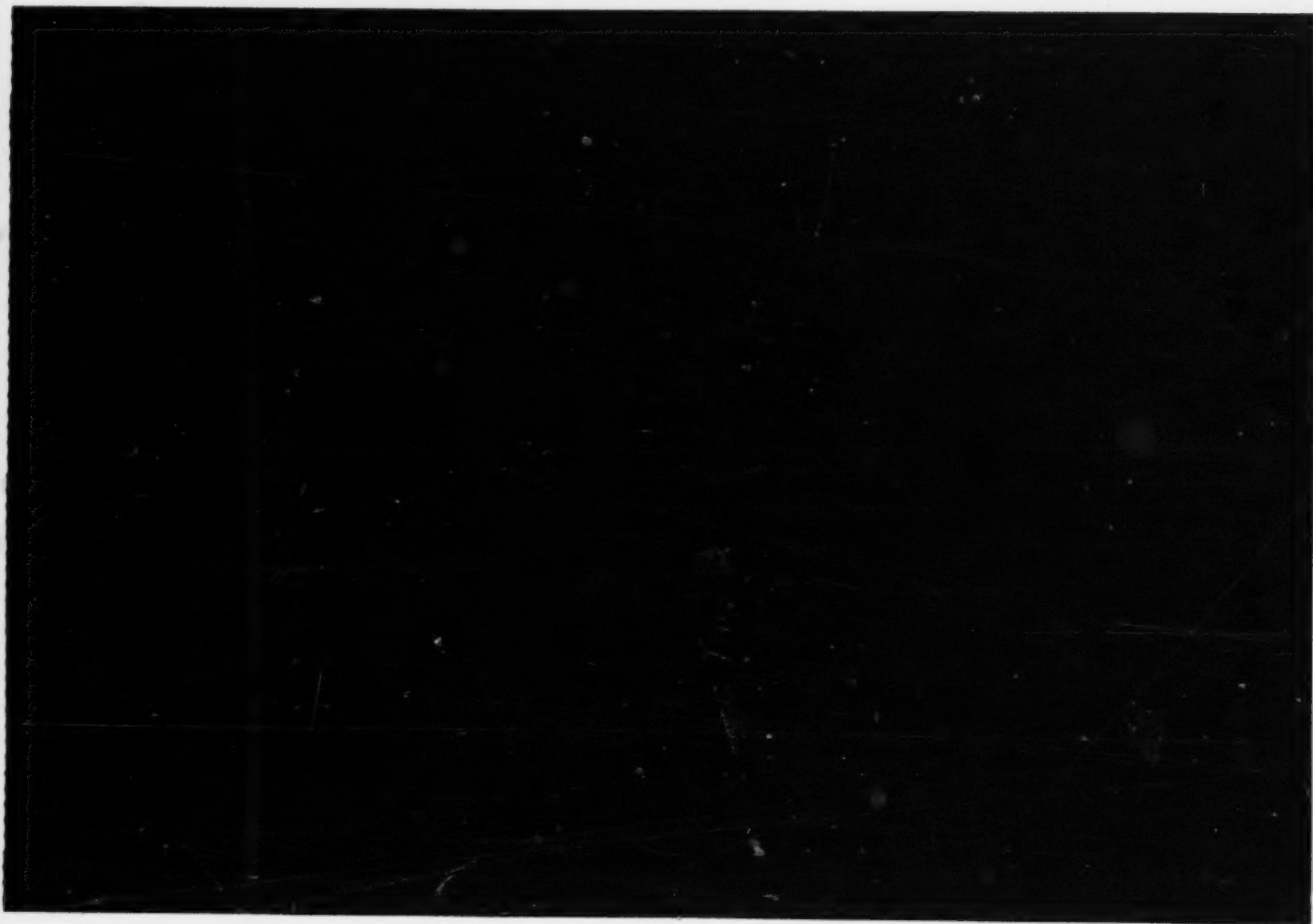


Fig. 13

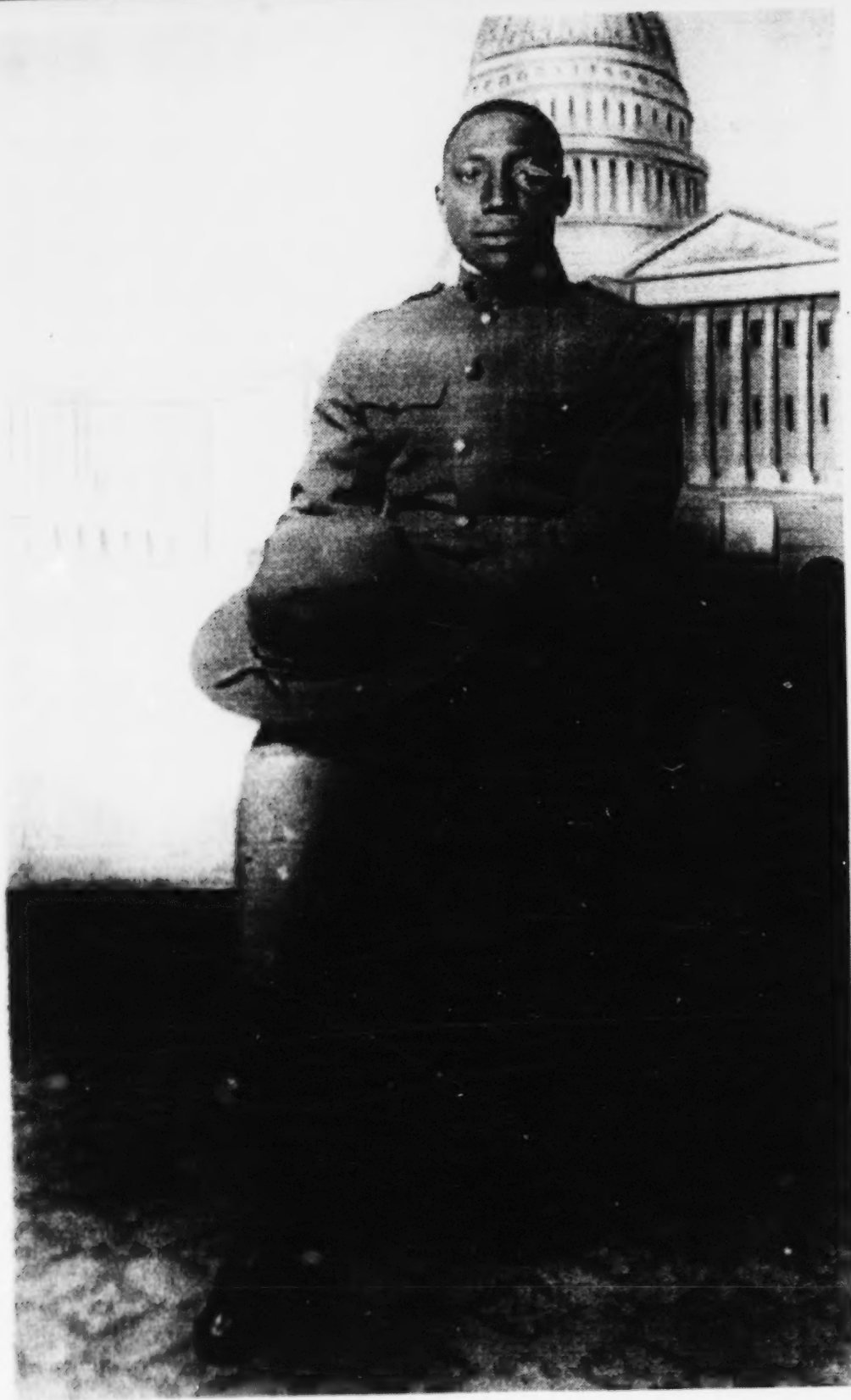


Fig. 14

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Fig. 15

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Fig. 16

Fig. 17



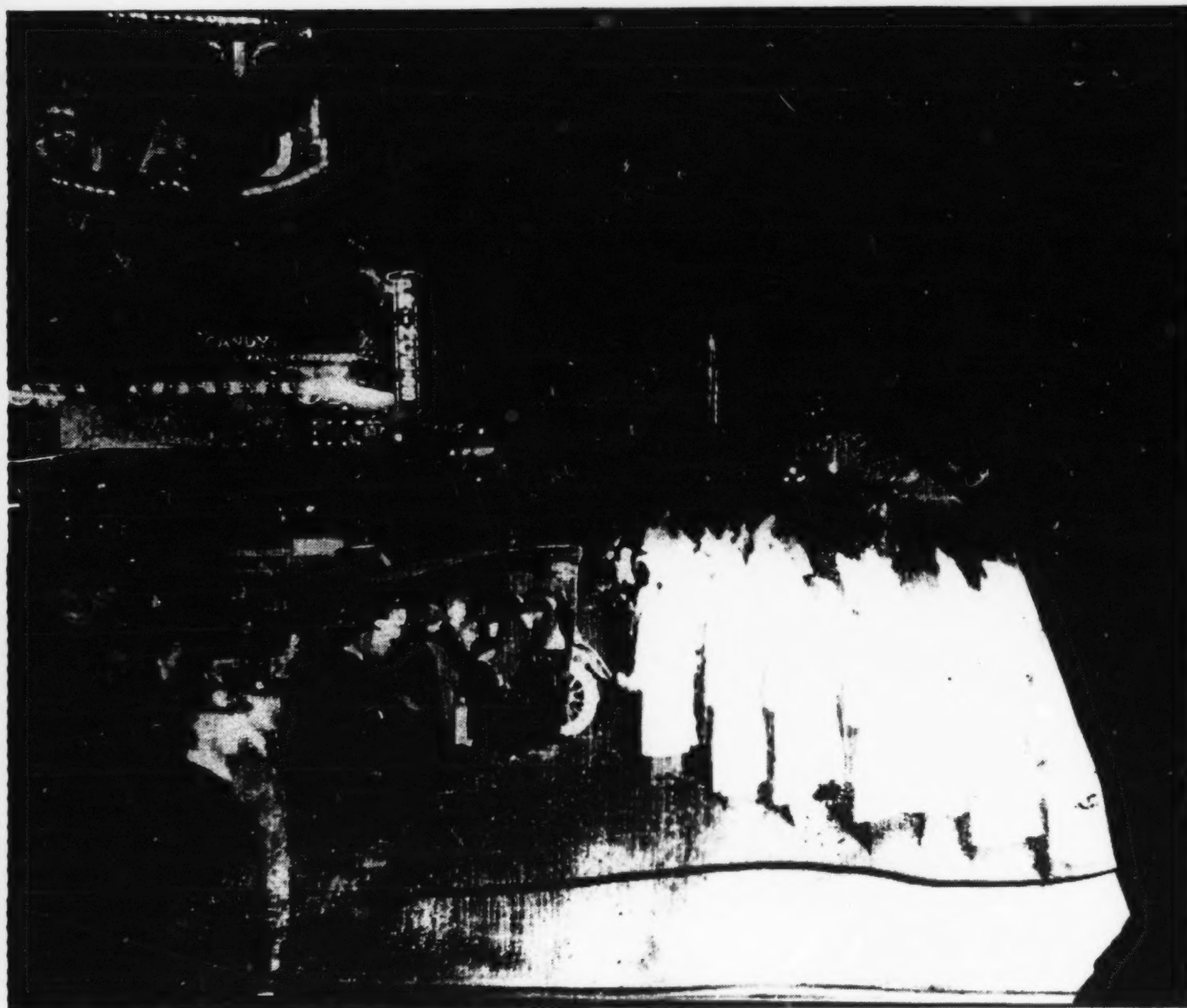


Fig. 18



Fig. 19

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